

Letter from *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*

When they saw that despite all this they were unable to cow [the Armenians], then they openly ordered the magi and chief-magi to write a letter in keeping with their perverse religion. And this is a copy of the letter:

“mihnerseh, Great Vizir of Iran and non-Iran, many greetings to Greater Armenia.

“You must know that every man who dwells under heaven and does not accept the Mazdaean religion is deaf and blind and deceived by the demons of Haraman.

“For before heaven and earth existed the great god Zrvan sacrificed for a thousand years and said: ‘Perhaps I shall have a son, Ormizd by name, who will create heaven and earth.’ And he conceived two in his belly, one from making sacrifice and one from saying ‘perhap.’ When he knew that there were two in his belly, he said: ‘To the one who emerges first I shall give my rule.’

“But the one who had been conceived from his doubt tore open the belly and came out. Zrvan said to him: ‘Who are you?’ He said: ‘I am your son Ormizd.’ Zrvan said to him: ‘My son is luminous and sweet-smelling, you are gloomy and evil-loving.’ And when he had wept very bitterly, he gave him his rule for a thousand years.

“When he begat the other son he called him Ormizd. He took the rule from Arhmn and gave it to Ormizd, saying to him: ‘Up to now I sacrificed to you, now do you sacrifice to me.’ And Ormizd created heaven and earth, but Arhmn worked evil in opposition.

“And creation is thus divided: the angels are Ormizd’s, but the demons Arhmn’s. And everything good, both in heaven and here, is Ormizd’s and everything harmful done there and here Arhmn worked. Likewise, whatever is good on earth Ormizd did, and whatever is not good Arhmn did. Just as Ormizd made man, Arhmn made diseases, illnesses, and death. All misfortunes and disasters that occur, and bitter wars, are the creations of the evil side; but success and empires and glory and honors and health of body, beauty of face, eloquence and longevity—these receive their existence from the good one. And everything which is not like that has been mixed with a creation of evil one’s.

“All men are in error who say: ‘God made death, and evil and good derive from him.’ Especially as the Christians say: ‘God is jealous. Because of the eating of a single fig from the tree. God made death, and subjected man to that punishment.’ Such jealousy not even man has for man, let alone God for men. For who says this is deaf and blind and deceived by the demons of Haraman.

“Again there is another error: ‘God who created heaven and earth came,’ they say, ‘and was born of some woman called Mary, whose husband was Joseph.’ But in truth he was son to a certain Banturak by an illicit intercourse. And many have gone astray after such as man.

“If the Romans have ignorantly gone astray in their great folly and have been deprived of our perfect religion, they have brought their own ruin upon themselves. But why are you infatuated with their error? Do you hold the same religion that your lord has, especially because we have to give account for you before God.

“Do not believe your leaders whom you call Nazarenes, for they are very deceitful. What they teach in words they do not practice in deeds. ‘To eat meat,’ they

say, 'is not a sin,' yet they themselves do not like to eat meat. 'It is right to marry,' but they themselves do not wish even to look at a woman. 'It is a great sin,' they say, 'to accumulate riches,' but they praise poverty excessively. They honor misfortune and despise success; they mock the name of fortune and greatly scorn glory. They love simplicity of clothing, and honor the dishonorable more than the honorable. They praise death and condemn life. They dishonor the births of men and praise childlessness. And if people were to listen to them and not approach their wives, the end of the world would soon arrive.

“But I did not wish to put all the details in writing for you, because there are many other things that they say. But what is even worse than what we have just written, they preach that God was crucified by men, that he died and was buried, then rose and ascended to heaven. Should you yourselves then not have made a judgment concerning such unworthy doctrines? Demons, who are evil, are not seized and tortured by men, let alone God, the Creator of all creatures. This is shameful for you to say, and these words are most incredible to us.

“So there are two possibilities before you; either answer this letter word for word, or come to court and appear before the great assembly.”

Elishē, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, trans. By Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 77-80

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